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# Feminisms and Cross-ideological Feminist Social Research: Standpoint, Situatedness and Positionality – Developing Cross-ideological Feminist Research

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## **Feminisms and Cross-ideological Feminist Social Research: Standpoint, Situatedness and Positionality – Developing Cross-ideological Feminist Research<sup>i</sup>**

By Myfanwy Franks<sup>ii</sup>

### **Abstract**

When we consider the different cultural spaces in which feminist social researchers might be carrying out empirical research the nature of 'feminist social research' becomes difficult to define. The issue becomes even more complex when we consider the multiple standpoints, contexts and positionalities of different kinds of feminists from diverse backgrounds, both secular and religious. There cannot be a blanket universal agreement between feminists from different ideological positions regarding appropriate subjects and methodologies for research. Nevertheless, the writer concludes that through a pragmatic feminist approach, exemplified by working in a situated way with the materials that are available, we can move toward moments of issue-based coalition between standpoints.

**Key words:** feminist social research, feminist standpoint theory, cross-cultural feminist research, Islamic and 'Western' feminisms

### **Introduction**

Arriving at an acceptable universal definition of feminism or of what it is that constitutes feminist research is problematic. This is because the patriarchal relations against which feminisms constitute a resistance, differ in their configuration from place to place. It is evident that the contexts in which feminist research is carried out differ considerably. 'Situated' experience leads to 'situated' knowledge and consequently there are diverse feminisms which include both secular feminisms and feminisms within religions. That which is progressive in one situation may be retrogressive in another. In this paper I shall address some of the important issues in feminist social research methodology that have arisen over the past two decades and attempt to find ways to build bridges between epistemological differences of application in a cross-cultural context. These methodological issues include the notion that feminist researchers should not be in the business of objectifying women as well as the problematic nature of objectivity in feminist social research. The issue of difference among feminists makes it impossible to construct a prescribed universal method with respect to these concerns. Three critical influences in the definition of identity are standpoint, situation, and positionality, i.e., the way in which a group or individual is defined by others. In liberal discourse the last of these is often neglected as an identity issue. The three concepts imply that identities and outlooks are fluid and that there cannot be universally prescribed research methods. At the same time I shall argue that although differences between feminist identities are multiple and complex, that the three concepts of standpoint, situatedness and positionality suggest that amidst the apparently irreconcilable differences there are possibilities of *moments* of agreement and understanding between feminists from different backgrounds. Standpoint, situatedness and positionality also imply that there cannot be universally taboo groups for research purposes nor prohibited issues for feminist research. Although the postmodern emphasis on difference means that the impossibility of a universal agreement has been exposed, there remains the potential for joint research and action on specific issues between networks of

feminists of different standpoints. I conclude that the way forward for feminist social research is a pragmatically based research which utilises the tools and materials available locally (and globally available if accessible)<sup>iii</sup>, purposive research with a user group or groups in mind and is not simply theory for theorisation's sake.

Below I shall discuss the standpoints, locatedness and positionalities of feminisms especially in relation to Islamic and 'Western' forms of feminism. The issues of the objectification of women in feminist research and the problematic nature of objectivity in feminist social research are also addressed. As indicated above, the writer concludes that the way forward may be through the possibility of issue-based coalitions.

## Located Feminisms

In developing countries it is sometimes said that women's rights come under the umbrella of human rights. Globally there are feminisms, Eastern and Western, and between these are overlap and interchange. For instance there are Islamic feminists in the West and Western feminists in the East. Leila Ahmed has made a distinction between two kinds of Islamic feminism, which were historically rooted in the Egypt of the early twentieth century. These were modernist feminists who were in favour of unveiling and women's suffrage and who had dialogue with the West, and Islamist feminists who were opposed to Westernization and unveiling (Ahmed 1992:180). Both these threads of feminism have influenced the later forms of Islamic feminism, which are now apparent in the West. Azza Karam differentiates in present-day Egypt between 'Muslim feminists' and 'Islamist feminists'. She describes Muslim feminists as using Islamic sources but as "aim(ing) to show that the discourse of equality between men and women *is* valid" (Karam 1998:11) and 'Islamist feminists' who hold the view that "women are oppressed precisely because they try to be 'equal' to men and are therefore being placed in unnatural settings and unfair situations, which denigrate them and take away their integrity and dignity as women" (Karam 1998: 9-10). For the purposes of this paper I use the term 'Muslim feminists' and 'Islamist feminists' to differentiate between these two different kinds of feminism differently rooted in the same faith. Islamist feminists and 'Western feminists' overlap geographically but they tend to move in separate worlds.

On a global scale, differences between feminists arise not only from the sources of feminisms such as secular or sacred texts and ideologies, resistance to different forms of exploitation, identity politics, ethnicity or sexuality but also through different understandings of what it means to be a woman. The various standpoints concerning the constructions of gender could be summed up under three headings: cultural constructions (nurture), poststructuralist constructions or deconstructions (discourse) or essentialist constructions (nature).

Cultural constructions of gender led to a Second Wave Western feminism which (although Radical feminists were often described as essentialist) largely embraced an androgynous view of gender equality. Gender was considered to be something that was the result of enculturation and there was nothing *a priori* about it. This view was exemplified in Liz Stanley's 'Should "Sex" Really Be "Gender" - or "Gender" Really Be "Sex"?' (Stanley 1984). At this time it was said that feminist research was 'by women for women'. Over the last two decades however, not only did it become clear that there is no unified women's voice but the poststructuralist deconstruction of 'woman' led to 'gender scepticism', a doubt that 'women' can be defined (Bordo 1990).<sup>iv</sup> Politically, some writers have seen this as problematic in that it could lead to a denial of oppression (Berkday 1993; Franks 2001; Hartsock 1987; Maynard 1994; Moi 1985). Postmodernist theory, in terms of critical theory, deconstructionism and poststructuralist analysis, has profoundly changed the way in which we can look at feminist research, action and political interventions (de Groot & Maynard 1993: 157). It does this by deconstructing former understandings of gender as well as race and class, suggesting that women exist only as a "binary category in a hierarchical relationship to 'Men'" (Stanley & Wise [1983] 1993:204). If this is purely the case then women's experience

ceases to exist, it becomes a phantasm; it is “to put theory in an imperialistic relationship to life” (Stanley & Wise [1983] 1993:204). From an activist perspective, deconstruction of gender is arguably ‘anti-feminist’ rather than post-feminist because it is particularly problematic for feminists in the developing world as well as in centres in the first world where first and third worlds meet. In these situations where there are urgent needs for social research, intervention and co-operative change it is imperative that needs are not theorised away. Theoretically, the inability to define ‘women’ can be construed as negating not only the idea of feminist methodology but of feminism itself. The Islamist feminists mentioned above are among feminists who currently adopt an essentialist position regarding gender (Afshar 1998:18, Karam 1998, Franks 2001) taking the view that womanhood is an essential God-given characteristic.

Generally, feminist social research could be said to aim at equality. Even this concept of equality, an Enlightenment idea, is not uniformly understood because equity and gender are constructed differently from different feminist standpoints. This is certainly the case if we contrast the Islamist feminist notion (basing their feminism upon the Qur’an), of gender complementarity with the more androgynous Western view of gender equality. Because of their belief in natural law and the possibility of conforming to it (*fitra*) (Al-Azmeh 1993:77), Islamist feminists are complementarian in their approach to gender difference. This belief in a kind of geometrical gender complementarity differentiates them, not only from Muslim feminists but from the majority of Western feminists as well who base their notion of equality on a more androgynous model. Both Muslim and Islamist feminists, however, argue for *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), and against “existing patriarchal formations ... and the implications of their formations on gender, and both use similar ‘tools’ of analysis and argumentation”, that is, they both refer to Islamic texts (Karam 1998:12). The difference is in the Muslim feminists’ contextualisation of Qur’anic and other religious requirements within history and culture as a means of understanding and interpretation. The Islamist feminism which does not draw its model from the West and which bases itself upon the provision for women within the Qur’an appears to be growing in the present time. Muslim feminist activists who do not reject the *hijab*, feminists who follow on from Malak Hifni Nassef of Egypt at the beginning of this century (Ahmed 1992:175-183), have been joined by activists not only in the Muslim world but also in the West.

Many women who are activists for women’s rights in Islam do not like the term ‘feminist’ (Kian 1997; Karam 1998) because of the Western connotations and because they argue there are ‘no women’s issues’ within Islam. Karam nevertheless uses the term for two reasons: firstly, to distinguish them from ‘non-feminist’ Islamists and secondly, to “indicate... possible points of intersection with other women activists” (Karam 1998: 10). The latter is an important point which is linked to the purpose of this paper to debate where interests between women with disparate beliefs intersect and where it might be possible, for a moment, to find a shared voice. This is a necessary response to the postmodern atomisation of feminisms into a myriad particularities and specificities with no common articulation.

With the potential for difference and differentiation within feminisms in mind we need to explore the possibilities we have for a unifying definition of feminism which does not assume Westernisation. For this reason I particularly like the Iranian feminist Parvin Paidar’s minimalist definition of feminism as “aiming to increase women’s rights, opportunities and choices within any ideology or context” (Paidar 1995:xi). We also need to find ways forward which can unify us. If we need to ‘act locally’ we still need to think globally. The way forward I would suggest is in recognizing the existence of a multiplicity of standpoints and the ways in which they not only divide us but also the ways in which they can facilitate issue-based coalition.

In view of the fragmentation of feminism into a multiplicity of feminisms and feminist standpoints where does one start to piece together appropriate methodologies and methods that will apply to specific situations? Clearly there is no monolithic way of doing feminist research. In the past feminist research was about praxis, the idea that it should *do* something. It tended to use

qualitative methods and was regarded as potentially empowering to the participants and as directed towards social change (Kelly et al 1994). Even though the emphases on deconstructionism and difference have thrown a sense of theoretical unease over the relevance of feminist methodology, de Groot and Maynard conclude that a “women centred” approach to women’s studies which connects “the empirical and the analytical... (and is) made with a concern for practical interventions” is the way forward (de Groot & Maynard 1993:174). Feminist scholarship is enriched by adopting positive insights of poststructuralism, deconstructionism and critical theory in respect of power relations but if the resulting analyses are merely textual and not located within social and historical contexts then they are divorced from the possibility of political action.

## **Objectivity**

For feminist social research methodology there are also issues regarding objectivity which have been written about at length. Not only postmodernist and poststructuralist theory, but also feminist methodology in general has treated the goal of objectivity in research as an unobtainable phantasm. This, in the feminist case, is because of the ‘masculine’ bias of the notion of scientific objectivity in mainstream studies. Harding suggests the possibility of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ objectivity and that objectivity is stronger if the researcher exposes the cultural and biographical aspects of the research and weaker if they do not (Harding 1991). ‘Weak’ objectivity is where the researcher remains invisible and “suppresses how cultural and biographical aspects of knowing help to create the knowledge which is produced. The latter, because it includes the systematic examination of such background and domain assumptions and influences, maximizes the possibility of producing rigorous accounts by making what is usually hidden and unacknowledged visible and, therefore, part of the equation in assessing knowledge claims” (Maynard 2001:12). By offering up the researcher’s biographical details for scrutiny of their possible influence on research practice and outcomes feminist social researchers have attempted to move towards a greater degree of objectivity in a study of women’s experiences which have frequently been hidden from the main stream. The exposure of biographical details of the researcher and researcher’s standpoint allows the reader to make an analysis of the ways in which the tendencies of the researcher may have influenced the research (Edwards 1990; Harding 1987). But Maynard (2001) wonders how possible it is to achieve full reflexivity in the research process or how it might be put into practice because “Systematic self-knowledge is not transparently available” (Maynard 2001:12).

It is not ‘objectivity’, which is the problem as such but the illusion of objectivity. The exposure of objectivity as illusory is problematic for feminist research, which tends to be small scale because of limitations of access to funding. Who will fund research where the researchers do not make truth claims about the findings? The notion of working towards ‘strong’ objectivity is perhaps more realistic than a descent into the nebulousness of a research world where all findings amount to fiction.

## **Objectification and Power Relations**

The power relations involved in the research process are complex and multi-dimensional. Formerly the research interviewer was positioned in the literature as being in the power position but more recent writing (Franks 2001a; Luff 1999; Phoenix 1994)) argues that the power position is not monolithic and that there are moments when the feminist researcher can feel helpless. Further, in the processes of research and dissemination the researcher can become caught in the crossfire between standpoints (Göle 1996; Ginsburg 1997; Franks 2001a). Millen also points to the fact that women are not uniformly oppressed and that the researcher’s idea of empowerment may not be empowering to the interviewee (Puwar 1997; Millen 1997).

The objectification of other women is another much discussed issue particularly associated with power relations in feminist social research. It is generally held that in feminist social research the researcher should not be in the business of objectifying her sisters (Oakley 1981). Objectification has been regarded as a masculine preoccupation that necessitates a power relation. But the problem is that feminists *are* in hierarchical relationships with feminists because of the structures in which we live and work. It is also not possible to conduct any research without objectifying the researched. "The very idea of representing women, even if in the form of 'letting them speak', is to constitute women as objects. To claim that 'they' are subjects is to avert the question of authorship and the constitution of a 'feminist self' via an other" (Game 1991:31). Not only is a degree of objectification integral to the research process but Ann Game points to the manner in which non-feminist women are the means through which the researcher constructs an academic feminist self.

Logically there cannot be research, by its very nature a species of surveillance, without some form of objectification. The literature of the gaze, deriving as it does from Foucault's Panopticon theory (Foucault 1977), demonstrates how the possessor of the (research) gaze is in the power position over all (s)he surveys. Surveillance is a means of social control producing 'docile bodies'. The research gaze weighs the words of the researched, observes their interactions and at times even intrudes into interpreting their very body language. Their words are captured, sifted, scrutinised and analysed repeatedly. There are different kinds of objectification and this treating of a participant as an object of scrutiny for research purposes is clearly one form. Power in this context is taken to mean ownership of the research gaze but even though a degree of objectification is inevitable the power relation is neither static nor one-way. "Relations of power-knowledge are not static forms of distribution, they are 'matrices of transformations' " (Foucault [1979] 1990). For instance the researcher needs the co-operation of the researched and as Ann Phoenix (1994) has pointed out, until the researcher has collected the data, the participant is in many ways in a power position. The researcher has to come up with the data or she can be out of a career (Franks 2001). Further, the feminist researcher is frequently in a weak position regarding her employment status and conditions. This relates not only to discriminatory practices and structural issues within universities relating to tenure but also to the many domestic, familial and internalised obstacles to women's careers as scholars and academics (Goetting & Fenstermaker 1995). Millen suggests these employment issues should be taken into account in formulating what a 'feminist research' might be (Millen 1997).

### **Standpoint, Situatedness and Positionality: The Possibility of Moments of Understanding Between Feminists**

Standpoint theory, in Western feminism, was initially based upon an adaptation of Marxist thinking in which men were seen to have a different standpoint from women (Smith 1974; Hartsock 1983). It was later developed to incorporate multiple feminist standpoints, situated knowledge and postmodern theory (Haraway 1988; Harding 1991; Collins 1990; Stanley 1990; Hundleby 1997; O'Leary 1997; Hirschman 1997; Hartsock 1997, 1999). The gender standpoints outlined above, within particular kinds of situated feminisms, create differences *between* feminisms and are among the main barriers to feminists developing any kind of shared universal message or method. In order to elucidate the issue of standpoint I have added the notions of situatedness in terms of the specificities of location as well as positionality (Alcoff 1997). By 'positionality' I refer to the way in which the individual identity and affiliations we have are positioned by *others*. Specific forms of feminism are situated as a response to the specific manifestations of patriarchal relations within any given culture or belief system. The notion of positionality is important as a counterbalance to the possible over-personalisation of standpoint within liberal discourse as if it were always the outcome of choice. We do not always select our standpoint; we sometimes have it thrust (erroneously) upon

us. Positionality counters the over-subjectification that may take place in postmodern discourse on issues such as gender, power and ethnicity. For instance although we may be asked to define our own ethnicity in social research, ethnicity is clearly not merely a subjective issue.

Positionality relates to how positional meaning is rooted in difference: “the fundamental insight of Saussurean linguistics (is) that meaning is constructed through linguistic opposition rather than by absolute reference” (Barrett 1987:33). This is the notion of ‘the supplement’ - the idea that something is created by the opposite and does not have intrinsic meaning as a thing-in-itself (Derrida [1971] 1998). This has been especially applied by postmodernist feminists in relation to the concept of ‘woman’ considered in terms of ‘masquerade’<sup>v</sup> as opposed to essence (Butler 1990).

Positionality is therefore a cultural concept relating to gender, ethnicity, culture and so on. There are different kinds of positionality: ascribed positionality (as is generally the case with gender); selective positionality (as in the case of those who opt for a particular position) and enforced positionality (where others forcibly define the position whether it meets with subjective criteria or not). As is obvious from current events, the last of these formulations of our ethnic or ideological position can be thrust upon us and at times they may not bear any resemblance to how we perceive ourselves. It is possible through this enforced positionality to die for an ideology, even one that is not our own or about which one cares little. The same is the case in relation to ethnicity as was demonstrated for instance in the Bosnian War.

Alcoff (1997), who adopts positionality as a means of building bridges between cultural and poststructuralist feminists, suggests that ‘essentialist’ constructions are indefensible today. Nevertheless, if we consider feminisms on a global scale, Eastern and Western, essentialism remains evident in the picture. As already mentioned, Islamist feminists in East, West and Middle East hold the view of gender complementarity and believe womanhood to be a God-given attribute. Earlier radical Western feminists such as Mary Daly (1978) and Andrea Dworkin (1982) also took the view that it was possible to define what a woman is. Alcoff (1997) alludes to Irigaray, the French feminist who suggests there is ‘women’s language’, as holding an essentialist gender view. So although the secular feminists would not necessarily agree with the idea that womanhood is ‘God given’, Islamist feminists are not alone in making an essentialist construction of femininity.

The concept of ‘positionality’ with which Alcoff attempts to reconcile cultural feminists and poststructuralist feminists with differing constructions of gender is based on the notion that whatever the construction of femininity the way in which women are positioned is the relevant issue and the basis for action for social justice. This follows on the concept of ‘identity politics’ developed by the Combahee River Collective (1983) which postulates that “one’s identity is taken (and defined) as a political point of departure, as a motivation for action, and as a delineation of one’s politics” (Alcoff: 1997: 347-8). Alcoff wants to combine the concept of identity politics with a conception of the subject as positionality thereby forging a link between positionality and joint action.

Alcoff describes how the essentialist definition of ‘woman’ makes ‘woman’s’ identity independent of her external situation: “since her nurturing and peaceful traits are [conceived of as] innate they are ontologically autonomous of her position with respect to others or to the external historical and social conditions generally” (Alcoff 1997: 349). The attribution through essentialism of certain traits of temperament to women on a universal scale is obviously problematic.

Alcoff writes:

The positional definition, on the other hand, makes her (woman’s) identity relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and

ideologies, and so on. If it is possible to identify women by their position within this network of relations, then it becomes possible to ground a feminist argument for women, not on a claim that their innate capacities are being stunted, but that their position within the network lacks power and mobility and requires radical change (Alcoff 1997: 349).

She concludes that ‘Woman is a position from which a feminist politics can emerge’ (Alcoff 1997:350). Given that the positionality of women can be the means of joint action it may be that feminists who hold an essentialist understanding of gender can be incorporated into this possibility on the basis of issue. Judith Stacey writes that “the tired ‘essentialist’ vs. social constructionist discourse seems increasingly irrelevant to struggles for social justice” (Stacey 2001:102) and she suggests that, post the concept of the ‘gay gene’, homophobic fundamentalist Christians are more likely than gay activists to embrace cultural accounts of sexual identity. Whatever the perceived construction of gender, inequalities due to the ascribed or enforced positionalities of women are a feminist issue. In whatever way femininity is understood, the majority of women are still placed in an unequal position in relation to the majority of men both in terms of income and power.

Positionality can help us to negotiate the issues of difference in the case of empirical social feminist research regarding the understanding of women in any given society. It can also be used as a conceptual tool in terms of the ways in which we negotiate and mediate other kinds of differences between women and specifically between feminists themselves. Our own standpoints and locations need to be taken into account in understanding the ways in which we position other feminists and understand the issues which may for them be vital for social research, for instance the way in which unmarried women are positioned both in work and in societies which, for religious reasons, prioritise and idealise the married state. Living in the United States or the United Kingdom as Western feminists it is easy to overlook the problems represented by the unmarried state in some Muslim countries. It was recently graphically spelt out for me in Morocco when an angry and eventually sobbing colleague acted out at a conference how she had been publicly ignored and humiliated on account of her never-married status when she went alone to claim a prize to a competition. It is hard for some of us to imagine ourselves in someone else’s skin and obtain a glimpse of how difficult that could be. This is because those of us who are Western feminists in a liberal democracy are frequently in a situation where we can debate sexualities and sexual preferences. In such a situation issues related to ‘singleness’ tend only to arise as a crushing oppression within specific religious and cultural contexts within the West. For instance, this is the case for single evangelical women in some fundamentalist house church movements in Britain (Aune 1998) or within some particular minority ethnic religious-cultural groupings. This illustrates the point about how research can be progressive in one situation and retrogressive in another context. Research concerning never-married women is vital in specific contexts but may not be considered sufficiently ‘feminist’ by some Western feminists who may deny the validity of marriage even in societies where there are currently deeply limited alternatives.

It is also necessary to look at the ways in which some women are positioned as non-feminist or anti-feminist who might regard themselves as activists for women’s rights within religions or other belief systems. This has been the experience of some Evangelical feminists such as Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) in the USA. On their Website they make the official statement that they believe, “that the Bible, properly interpreted, teaches the fundamental equality of men and women of all racial and ethnic groups, all economic classes, and all age groups, based on the teachings of scriptures as reflected in Galatians 3:28”:

There is neither Jew nor Greek  
There is neither slave nor free  
There is neither male nor female



For you are all one in Christ Jesus<sup>vi</sup>

These activists for women's rights, within a religious group, have been positioned as 'anti-feminist' by the Institute for Democratic Studies in New York's Website.<sup>vii</sup> It would be fascinating to know what criteria the institute applies in order to decide whether a group is feminist or anti-feminist or whether the assumption was made that they are anti-feminist by their association with evangelicalism. Conversely, it is possible to position an activist as a feminist only to discover that she rejects such a description. This might be the case for some activists within Islam because the term 'feminism' may be associated for them with colonialism and secularism. Some of the interviewees in my research in Britain with Christian and Islamic revivalist women preferred the title 'activist for women's rights within Islam' (Franks 2001). But it was also the case that a Christian activist whom I met on a visit to a women's refuge in Jordan insisted that she was not a 'feminist' because she associated the term with 'man-hating'. A difficult conversation followed where I realized that because I claim to be a feminist we were separated by a word, and that she was making the assumption that I embrace a blanket hatred of men.

### **Finding a Way Forward**

What might be feminist in one situation will not necessarily be feminist in another. Not only have we learned this from black feminist writers and women of colour such as hooks (1981); Carby (1982); Puar (1996); Williams (1995) but also from Western feminist writers who have adopted Foucauldian theory and put it to feminist usage. Given the issues over standpoint, how can the researcher decide what is the most feminist way to proceed, especially in cross-cultural or inter-ideological research? One possibility is to encourage participatory research but the problem is that unequal and frequently unarticulated power relations mean that the participatory approach can be either exploitative or a pretence (Healy 2001).

Nancy Hartsock's formulation of standpoint theory has frequently been criticised for being monolithic but as Hirschmann (1997) suggests there are multiple feminist standpoints within Hartsock's theorisation. This frequently revisited theory can be expanded to accommodate postmodern thinking. O'Leary (1997) rightly suggests that beyond difference and discord caused by a multiplicity of standpoints and power relations the converse possibility of coalition exists. Although as feminists we cannot deny our differences, the way forward may lie in issue based coalitions. This is not a 'rainbow coalition' which suggests that somehow we only need to discover the "universality inherent in the human condition" (Bourne 1987:22 in Yuval Davis 1994: 421) but in the far more complex moments of connection and shared interest within diversity, a mobile network of differentials of power. This can be applied in feminist social research - so 'non-feminists' for instance are not necessarily perceived as the enemy. Sasha Roseneil (1999) has pointed to the possibility for an issue-based postmodern politics. We have had to relinquish the idea that there is an overarching feminist politic. Negotiating the minefield of what it is that it might be to be feminist (and non-feminist) from different standpoints becomes less fraught from this viewpoint. We need to be able to work globally to change the global positionality of women as less powerful than men and our best chance may well be through issue based coalitions. Collaboration on social research by communities of shared interest might bring about targeted local change as well as influence global attitudes to particular issues.

With regard to feminist social research, I conclude that a pragmatic and 'situated' feminist research which is applied rather than an end in itself, which uses the materials available in any given context and is of relevance to its users is the way forward. I see a pragmatic feminism as being about transforming the environments and cultures we inhabit - to make them more women friendly. Mary Klages (1997) suggests that American feminism has generally been pragmatic because much American feminist thought is oriented toward getting things done, toward theorizing

so that some kind of social action or change can take place. She calls it “theorizing-for-application” and bases it in a number of political movements including Marxism, civil rights and the women’s liberation movement. This down-to-earth approach would seem to have a greater application in the developing world (and in my view in the ‘developed’ world) than theorization for its own sake. As Um Zhivago, an activist in a Palestinian refugee camp interviewed by Elizabeth Warnock Fernea in her global search for Islamic feminism, said “A revolution is like cooking; before you begin, you look in the cupboard to see what ingredients you have to hand to work with” (Warnock Fernea 1998:414). When I gave this quote at a recent conference in Morocco someone immediately pointed out that this was locating women back in the kitchen. She was undoubtedly right but globally the majority of women are still positioned in the kitchen as carers and nurturers and frequently as unpaid labour. We have to start from the metaphorical kitchen in which we might find ourselves, with the materials that are available. As Liz Stanley suggests (above), in feminist social research, we must not let theory be in an ‘imperialistic relationship with life’. Research subjects and methodologies are built from the conditions in which we find ourselves. As feminists we need to develop an understanding of each other’s standpoints, locatedness and positionalities. In short, feminist social research is pragmatically based, reflexive in using the materials available and is sometimes about issues that are not condoned by all feminists at any given time. It is unhelpful to prescribe methods in such diversity. In fact Millen suggests that at times it is preferable to “abandon feminist methodologies in order to advance the broader agenda of feminist research” (Millen 1997:2). Feminist research could for instance be quantitative. The method is not the problem but the questions we ask might be. What makes it feminist is its concern with the rights and opportunities of women wherever they may be situated, located and positioned. In the process we need to seek out the possibilities for collaboration in feminist social research in terms of making coalitions, researching our similarities and differences.

### **Post-script on Praxis**

Within their diverse ideological frameworks, feminists, religious and secular, are all seeking their own brand of gender justice. They are all engaged in resisting and diluting located patriarchal formations. The struggle for this justice is what Rana Kabbani (1993), from a Muslim perspective, has described as ‘gender *jihad*’. The scope for agreement across difference on appropriate feminist goals is clearly limited yet, through my research with Islamic and Christian revivalist women, I conclude that there are some possibilities for shared concerns between the Muslim, Islamist, Christian Evangelical, and other religious and secular feminists (Franks 2001) which could give rise to cross cultural/cross ideological research studies. These include, for example, where marriage is a cultural expectation, the right to *choose* whom one marries.<sup>viii</sup> There is a generally shared belief that all women should have the right to an education. Feminists within Islam and Christianity share a concern that the interpretation and transmission of religious texts should not be the male domain it has historically been in Western and Eastern traditions. There are shared concerns regarding financial security in motherhood, a woman’s right to her own income in or out of marriage and the right to appropriate support in the tasks of childbirth and childcare. Feminists from different backgrounds support women’s right to work outside the home if she so wishes but some are equally concerned that women involved in childcare should not be forced to work. There is also common desire for action against the sexual objectification and exploitation of women.

It may be that feminists with different constructions of gender might work together by targeting issues where the construction of femininity is not the most pressing issue but where gender justice relating to the positionality of women *is*. Such shared and serious issues in sectors of both “developed” and “developing” countries might be, for example, forced marriage or international trafficking of women.

It is not possible to offer a definitive template for a cross-ideological, issue-based, feminist social research methodology. This is because such projects represent uncharted territory and need to be developed in the field. What can be said is that emerging cross-ideological methodologies, building upon aspects of feminist action research as well as feminist research and development work, would be located and reflexive and would involve a high degree of trust building. At the initial stage the emphasis might be more on establishing ways of working together than on the substantive research. It would be essential to develop and pilot situated grass-roots methods of data collection and to agree on modes of analysis. In order to achieve the latter it might be necessary to re-examine the epistemological basis of specific methodologies and modes of analysis and evaluate them not only in relation to gender bias but also on terms of possible Eurocentricism, (post-) Christocentrism and neo-liberal individualistic assumptions.

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<sup>i</sup> An earlier version of this paper was given at the University of Jordan Women's Studies Conference - Jordanian Contemporary Women's Issues - 28-29 March 2001.

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<sup>iii</sup> I have noted from recent visits to Morocco and Jordan that many female scholars in universities do not to have access to the Internet .

<sup>iv</sup> Julia Kristeva (1974) might be regarded as a forerunner of what has come to be called postfeminism.

<sup>v</sup> I am here borrowing a term used by Joan Riviere in 'Womanliness as Masquerade' in V. Burgin, J. Donald and C. Kaplan (Eds.) *Formations of Fantasy*(London: Methuen, 1986).

<sup>vi</sup> There were a number of Married Women's Property Acts in Britain. Kabbani (1993) suggests the date of 1925 but I have identified the Married Women's Property Act of 1870 as the time at which married British women obtained this right (Franks 2001).

<sup>vii</sup> Antifeminist Organizations: Institutionalising the Backlash April 2000 Institute for Democratic Studies, New York <http://www.institutefordemocracy.org> 7/4/00

<sup>viii</sup> There were a number of Married Women's Property Acts in Britain. Kabbani (1993) suggests the date of 1925, but I have identified the Married Women's Property Act of 1870 as the time at which married British women obtained this right (Franks 2001).